

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 3 – Part 3

OUR REGENERATION BY FAITH; REPENTANCE

In the last two articles, we learned that for Calvin, faith is the foundation of repentance, that repentance is turning from self-centeredness to God, that repentance requires an inner transformation, that repentance has two parts, mortification (we see that we need repentance) and vivification (we are transformed), that repentance is a life-long process and that repentance is always to be seen as a movement toward a loving God. In this chapter Calvin offers us a thorough examination of repentance; what it means, how it works, and where it comes from being among the topics.

Summary: Calvin continues his discussion of repentance by examining inward and outward repentance. Inward repentance is described as the change of our hearts from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. This process is essential for the author, “...nothing is achieved unless we begin from the inner disposition of the heart” (pg. 610). He quotes the prophet Joel, “*Rend your hearts and not your garments*” (Joel 2:13) as the Biblical basis for his belief. As he discusses this inward transformation, Calvin cautions his readers not to put too much stock in the spiritual exercises used by the Roman Church as means to bring about this inward transformation. Many of these spiritual exercises were physically painful (walking miles and miles on one’s knees to a shrine or self-flagellation, as examples). While these may be helpful Calvin says that the church should show more gentleness in helping people achieve inner transformation (pg. 610).

In particular Calvin focuses on weeping and fasting, two common practices of his day. Again, while these may be appropriate in some instances, he does not want people to substitute these for true rending of the heart (pg. 611). He does so because the temptation is to substitute an outward act for inward repentance; or to confuse the two. Instead he encourages people to private confession. “*Now while it is not always necessary to make men open and conscious witnesses of our repentance (public confession in church), yet to confess to God privately is part of true repentance that cannot be omitted*” (pg. 612). The gift of God in repentance is that it is God’s way of helping us become more and more like Christ, not only through inner transformation but through forgiveness.

Calvin states that the entire Gospel can be summed up under two headings, “*repentance and forgiveness of sins*” (pg. 613). Through repentance we make ourselves open to the love and grace of Christ, which then comes to use through forgiveness. That forgiveness, which is a free gift of God, allows us to be “*engrafted into the life and death of Christ*” (pg. 615) and thus further transformed. Calvin puts it this way, “*For obviously God, renewing those he wills not to perish, shows the sign of his fatherly favor and, so to speak, draws them to himself with the rays of his calm and joyous countenance*” (pg. 616).

Finally, Calvin deals with the issue of the unforgiveable sin. This concept is referred to in both the Gospels and the Letter to the Hebrews. This unforgiveable sin is not simply committing a heinous act. Instead it is the act of knowing the love of God in Christ, and the life to which that love calls us, then rejecting that and standing defiantly against it. In other words, it is a conscious rejection of the forgiveness of God when it is freely offered. Calvin writes, “*Those who cannot be forgiven are those who cannot (bring themselves to) repent*” (pg. 620).

Reflections: Fake it till you make it. This was one of the great phrases of all time. It is a call to living our way into a new reality, even when we do not believe that we can. It is a call to practice what we know we are supposed to be and do until those things come naturally. In some ways, this is the faith works. When faith becomes a reality in our lives and we become new people, we seldom leave behind all our old ways and habits. By practicing our faith, it can and does become real within us. It goes from being “faking it” to “making it” an inner disposition of the heart.

Questions:

1. What practices do you use to align your heart with God’s?
2. How would you explain the purpose of our weekly prayer of confession to someone outside of the church?
3. Why are confession and repentance important in the life of a Jesus’ follower?